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Documentary

Coping with more than COVID-19

For the UNICEF video essay series see <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/coping-with-covid-19>

For more on the connections between climate and social systems see <https://www.drawdown.org/sectors/health-and-education>

When her parents could not afford to buy schoolbooks for their children in the midst of lockdown and job loss, 13-year-old Madhu, from Nepal, broke open her piggy bank. By pooling their savings, Madhu and her siblings could buy books and stationery, and continue their studies. Education, and its precarity for young women around the world, is a major theme in the UNICEF video essay series, “Coping with COVID-19”, which invited 16 adolescent girls from nine countries to film their lives under lockdown—“unfiltered, unscripted, 100% real”.

Even in Niger, where almost 90% of children live in poverty, some girls have access to mobile phones. These have proven to be an educational lifeline as schools have closed as a result of the pandemic. Through their phones, from countries all over the world, these young women share insights into their homes, life in lockdown with parents and siblings, and the challenges of continuing with school. Most powerfully, they share their fears, hopes, and goals for the future. The eloquence, gravity, and passion of these young women is so moving that a review of their videos cannot communicate the depth—yet grace—of their stories. One of the biggest messages shaped by the skilful editing of UNICEF is that theirs are voices not usually heard, and the most effective first step towards change is to listen. These girls know the challenges they face better than anyone else.

One risk to young women is that of child marriage, exacerbated in difficult times because of the increased financial burden families face. Marrying off daughters can sometimes marry the family into money, and, at least, relieves the parents of the burden of looking after that child. But it treats the girls as little more than property. “In our society child marriage needs to be stopped completely”, says Trisha, 15, from Bangladesh. “When a girl is a victim of child marriage, she is affected physically and emotionally.”

Laetitia, 15, from Chad, wants to become a lawyer “to help young girls, because today, a lot of girls are victims of violence and abuse”. She knows this directly, as one of her friends, a promising student, was raped by a school teacher

and has since been shunned and prevented from going to school. Adiaratou, 15, from Mali, laments a friend who “was a really brilliant student at school”, but dropped out because she was forced into marriage. R Sangamithra (15, from India), Zulfa (15, from Indonesia), Bijita (15, from India), Makadidia (15, from Mali), and Antsa (16, from Madagascar) have all had friends drop out of school and forced into marriages they did not want. Fanja, 15, from Madagascar, says, “I am sad because [one of my friends] was forced to get married. You could say I also lived the experience because she is my friend...She runs away a lot, and tries to tell her dad, ‘I am not going to get married, I should still be going to school.’”

There are other harmful practices that discriminate against girls, such as female genital mutilation, which, UNICEF warns, not only continues, but may increase in times of lockdown. Although made illegal in many countries, UNICEF has found that the practice continues, but is less often talked about. Adiaratou explains: “Female genital mutilation is the cause of death for a lot of girls. It can lead to problems like haemorrhaging during childbirth, the death of the child, and even the mother”. In Indonesia, UNICEF explains, “despite the practise being illegal, nearly 1 in 2 girls have undergone female genital mutilation”.

During the 5 weeks when these videos were made, several girls faced not only challenges related to COVID-19, but also unexpected floods in their villages, which saw them swimming in order to cross roads, losing their family’s food stores due to rain, and losing whole classrooms. “The rainy season is here and most of our classrooms are made of straw”, explains Esta, 15, from Niger. Project Drawdown, a team working on climate solutions, says that some initiatives designed primarily to ensure rights and foster equality—eg, access to high-quality, voluntary reproductive health care and high-quality, inclusive education—also have cascading benefits to climate change. Drawdown estimates over 85 gigatonnes of carbon could be reduced or sequestered by 2050 thanks to health and education initiatives.

Laetitia is fond of the phrase: “educating a girl is educating an entire nation”. These young women face complex interconnected challenges. It’s clear that having access to safe, reliable, high-quality education can help them make choices that will benefit their goals relating to future work, relationships, and community involvement. This should be important enough, for their sake. But the cascading consequences of their individual choices—relating to the ecological imbalance of floods, droughts, and pandemics, and the whip-smart spirit that many of these young women possess—may also help to save the world.

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